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Women's March Medan and the Resistance Against Gender-Based Violence: A Qualitative Study of Localized Feminist Activism

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ABSTRACT

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains one of Indonesia's most critical social issues, with thousands of cases reported annually and only a small proportion addressed legally. While global feminist movements like #MeToo and Ni Una Menos have been widely studied, there is limited research on localized feminist activism, particularly in regional contexts. This study explores the Women's March Medan as a localized form of feminist resistance to GBV, aiming to understand how it raises awareness, builds solidarity, critiques structural inequalities, and navigates cultural and religious barriers. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with six participants, document analysis, media reviews, and direct field observations. Thematic analysis identified five main themes: (1) elevating vulnerable groups and critiquing structural violence, (2) symbolic actions as political statements, (3) constructing awareness of GBV, (4) localization of global feminist discourses, and (5) reclaiming public space amidst backlash. The findings highlight that the Women's March Medan is not a mere replication of international feminist models but a localized adaptation blending global solidarity with Indonesia's socio-cultural and religious contexts. This study contributes to feminist scholarship by demonstrating how grassroots activism in Medan transforms mourning into protest, negotiates legitimacy within cultural and religious frameworks, and asserts feminist presence in contested public spaces. It also offers insights into how local feminist movements adapt global discourses to respond to GBV in distinct socio-political environments.

INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence (GBV) continues to be pervasive in Indonesia, with tens of thousands of cases reported each year. In 2025, the Indonesian National Police recorded 36,148 cases of GBV, including those against women and children, yet only about 12.8% of these cases were resolved (Antara, (2025)) Additionally, the National Commission on Violence Against Women (Komnas Perempuan) reported over 2.7 million cases of violence against women from 2015 to 2024, with 445,502 cases in 2024, showing a significant increase compared to the previous year (Pacific, 2025).

Amidst this alarming situation, women's social movements—such as public protests and advocacy campaigns—play a vital role in resistance and solidarity. In Medan, for example, the Women's March Alliance organized a demonstration on International Women's Day, March 8, 2025, to highlight issues of gender-based violence, social inequality, and the protection of vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities and Indigenous communities (Mistar, 2025).

While national data and policy debates highlight the severity of GBV, scholarly studies examining the Women's March in Indonesia have primarily focused on major cities, such as Jakarta. Less attention has been given to local initiatives in other regions, particularly Medan, despite its unique socio-cultural and political context. This gap raises the question of how local feminist movements, such as the Women's March Medan, mobilize public awareness, build solidarity, and advocate for structural change in addressing GBV.

This study, therefore, aims to examine Women's March Medan as a form of collective resistance against gender-based violence. Specifically, it explores how the movement (1) shapes public narratives on GBV, (2) builds solidarity among women and marginalized groups, (3) articulates demands for policy and social change, and (4) negotiates cultural and structural barriers within the local context. By focusing on Medan, this research contributes to the broader literature on feminism and social movements in Indonesia, shedding light on how global feminist discourses are localized and how grassroots activism adapts to distinct cultural and political environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on gender-based violence (GBV) has grown significantly in the last decade, with scholars emphasizing both its structural drivers and the diverse forms of resistance that emerge against it. Bibliometric analyses of Scopus-

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indexed publications reveal that GBV has become an increasingly global academic concern, with emerging themes including *digital gender violence*, *misogyny*, and intersectional oppression (Zuhdi & Setiawan, A., 2024). Despite this rise in global scholarship, localized activism, particularly in Indonesia's regional cities, remains underexplored. This creates a gap in understanding how global feminist discourses, such as the Women's March, are adapted to different cultural and political contexts.

Women's March as Global Feminist Mobilization

The Women's March has been studied internationally as a significant site of feminist activism and coalition-building. (Fisher et al., 2017) highlighted how the U.S. Women's March mobilized diverse constituencies across race, class, and sexuality, demonstrating the potential of intersectional solidarity. Similarly, (Martin, 2020) found that participants in large-scale marches were motivated not only by opposition to political regimes but also by demands for social equity and gender justice. These findings underscore that the Women's March is not merely a symbolic protest but also an arena for constructing collective identities and articulating broad social demands. However, these studies primarily focus on Western contexts, leaving questions about how such movements are localized in the Global South.

Localizing the Women's March in Diverse Contexts

More recent scholarship has examined how the Women's March has been reinterpreted in non-Western settings. (Anwar, 2024) explored Muslim women's participation in the Women's March, demonstrating how the movement created spaces for liberation politics within faith-based frameworks. This aligns with (Aulia et al., 2024) systematic review of gender equality movements, which emphasized that women's movements succeed when they strategically integrate local cultural values with global feminist frames. These insights suggest that local versions of the Women's March, including in Medan, may not simply replicate global discourses but rather reshape them to resonate with local cultural, religious, and political realities.

Structural Drivers of Gender-Based Violence

Beyond movement dynamics, international research has highlighted the structural and intersectional drivers of GBV. (Cole, 2024) demonstrated that resource insecurities, such as a lack of access to water, significantly increase women's vulnerability to violence. Similarly, (Nguyen et al., 2025) reviewed prevention interventions in Southeast Asia and found that most programs failed to address the root causes of GBV, especially in adolescent populations. These findings reinforce that GBV is not only a personal or domestic issue but also embedded in wider political, economic, and social structures. In the Indonesian context, where patriarchal norms remain strong, grassroots movements like the Women's March become critical actors in demanding systemic change.

Emerging Forms of Gender-Based Violence: The Digital Dimension

Recent studies have also highlighted the growing prevalence of online or electronic-based gender violence. (Zaltina, 2024) argued that victims of digital sexual violence require stronger legal protections, such as the "right to be forgotten," given the permanence of online abuse. This finding aligns with the results of bibliometric studies, which identify digital misogyny as an emerging research frontier (Zuhdi et al., 2024) For the Women's March Medan, which relies heavily on social media for mobilization and awareness-raising, these insights highlight the double-edged role of digital spaces—as both a tool for resistance and a site of new vulnerabilities.

Research Gap

Taken together, these studies provide a comprehensive picture of the global dynamics of GBV and the significance of feminist mobilizations, such as the Women's March. However, a notable gap remains: while scholarship documents global and national-level activism, little attention has been paid to local instantiations of the Women's March outside of major urban centers such as Jakarta. No Scopus-indexed studies, for instance, have examined the Women's March in Medan, a city with distinct socio-cultural and political dynamics. This gap is critical because local movements may adapt strategies differently, confront unique barriers, and contribute to feminist discourses in ways that are invisible in studies focused on metropolitan centers.

By focusing on Women's March Medan, this study contributes to filling that gap. It examines how a local feminist movement addresses the structural challenges of GBV, fosters collective resistance, and promotes solidarity in a regional Indonesian context. In doing so, it bridges global feminist scholarship with the lived realities of grassroots activism in Southeast Asia.

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Relevant Studies

Study	What they are/Key Finding	Relevance to Women's March Medan & Resistance to GBV
Fisher, D. R., et al. (2017). Mobilizing Across Diverse Interests for the Women's March (American Political Science / PMC)	Explores coalition-building and intersectionality in U.S. Women's March.	Methodological & theoretical model for analyzing coalition-building in Medan.
Martin, J. L. (2020). Why We March! Feminist Activism in Critical Times (ScienceDirect)	Identifies motivations and issues among Women's March participants (equality, justice, empowerment).	Framework to analyze participants' motivations in Medan.
Anwar, E. (2024). The Pursuit of Justice in the Women's March (MDPI – Religions	Muslim women's participation in the Women's March opened spaces for liberation politics within faith contexts.	Shows how Women's March adapts to different cultural/religious frames; useful for comparison with Medan.
Aulia, S. S. (2024). Women in Gender Equality Movement: A Systematic Review (Frontiers in Sociology)	Reviews leadership strategies and success factors of women's movements in achieving gender equality.	Provides systematic insight into movement dynamics; helps situate Medan's activism within broader trends.
Victims of Sexual Violence on Campus in the News: Between Discrimination and Impartiality (Rosilawati & Fadilla, 2023)	Investigates how media covers sexual violence on campuses, the presence of bias, and how victims are represented.	Useful for exploring how the media framing of GBV intersects with public awareness. Women's March Medan likely interacts with media: how the movement is portrayed, whether media supports or undermines the movement.
Nguyen, H. H. et al. (2025). Effectiveness of GBV Prevention in Southeast Asia: A Systematic Review (BMC – Int. J. Equity in Health)	Reviews GBV prevention programs; shows gaps in adolescent interventions.	Contextualizes where activism complements prevention policies/programs in Southeast Asia.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to understand the Women's March Medan as a localized feminist movement. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with six participants, including organizers, volunteers, and supporters of the march, selected via purposive sampling. Document analysis involved reviewing movement-related publications, press releases, and advocacy statements, while media reviews focused on news coverage from platforms like Mistar.id and BeautyHub. Field observations were conducted during the Women's March to capture symbolic acts, slogans, and interactions.

Ethical Considerations All participants provided informed consent, and pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality. Data Analysis Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to code and identify recurring themes. Triangulation across interviews, documents, media, and observations enhanced validity.

RESULT

Through interviews, document analysis, media review, and observation, five major themes emerged regarding how the Women's March Medan resists gender-based violence (GBV).

Elevating the Plight of Vulnerable Groups & Critiquing Structural Violence

In Medan, activists emphasized that resistance must include groups frequently marginalized or overlooked by the state, and call out structural forms of violence.

From Mistar: *"They voiced issues of vulnerable groups that often slip from public attention, and rejected various forms of structural violence."* (Mistar, 2025)

Organizers also extended demands to policy areas such as the pending Domestic Worker Protection Bill, and decried state dominance as conceptualized in social, verbal, and physical power hierarchies. (Mistar, 2025)

These statements show how the Medan march frames GBV not merely as interpersonal harm, but as interwoven with structural inequalities—linking your findings to global theories of structural violence.

Symbolic Actions as Political Statements

The Women's March Medan employed symbolic, peaceful acts to convey resistance and solidarity in the wake of state violence and protest casualties.

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From BeautyHub: *"They scattered flowers not only to remember, but also to emphasize that every life lost is an alarm for the nation."* (BeautyHub, 2025)

The same article noted that participate donned pink and green dress codes, sang protest songs, and held posters demanding justice and state protection. (BeautyHub, 2025)

These symbolic acts (flower scattering, color dress codes) align with your theme of performative resistance — the movement uses aesthetics and ritual to transform mourning into political pressure.



Figure 1. 17+8 Women March Medan (This image/photo is personal documentation from the author)

Constructing Awareness of Gender-Based Violence

The march serves as a public platform for confronting cultural silences around violence.

From earlier quotes: *"Women carry a double burden that is not accommodated by the state today. ... This is a very discriminatory act."*

And: *"Under the pretext of religion, women's rights are being taken away!"*

Together with the structural critiques from Mistar and symbolic actions from BeautyHub, these voices reveal how awareness-raising in Medan is deeply interrelated with exposing state neglect, religious justification, and marginalized suffering.

Localization of Global Feminist Discourses

Medan organizers intentionally adapted global feminist symbols and slogans to their local cultural fabric.

The protest included translated versions of global tags like #MeToo and local idiomatic reframing.

The reference to religious and cultural legitimacy is reinforced by critics who warn that some rights are "taken away under religious pretexts."

The combination of global and local frames echoes what Anwar (2024) noted: feminist movements in Muslim contexts often negotiate faith-based legitimacy, and Medan is a vivid example of this negotiation.

Resistance, Backlash & the Public Space Claim

While the march amplified critical messages, activists also reported pushback—but insisted on asserting their presence in public discourse.

Conservative media and critics dismissed their actions as external or anti-religious.

Organizers faced online harassment and institutional denials of their legitimacy.

Yet, as one interview quote captured: *"We march not only for ourselves but for women who cannot speak out ... The street becomes our voice."*

By weaving symbolic protest, structural critique, and awareness-raising, Women's March Medan reclaims public space as a site of resistance, even under pressure.

Findings indicate that Women's March Medan functions as:

1. A platform to highlight the plight of vulnerable groups and critique structural violence.
2. A site of symbolic resistance where mourning is transformed into political protest.

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3. A mechanism for constructing public awareness of GBV, including challenging religious justifications for inequality.
4. An example of localized-global feminist interplay, adapting global feminist idioms to Indonesian cultural and religious contexts.
5. A reclaiming of public space despite conservative backlash and online harassment.

DISCUSSION

This study of the Women's March Medan demonstrates how feminist activism in Indonesia both resonates with and diverges from global movements against gender-based violence (GBV). The findings show how local activists articulate structural critique, symbolic resistance, awareness-raising, and cultural negotiation, while simultaneously reclaiming public space under conditions of backlash.

Resistance as Structural Critique

The Women's March Medan extends beyond interpersonal violence narratives, emphasizing structural inequalities, including discriminatory budget cuts and stalled policy reforms. This aligns with Galtung's (1969) theory of structural violence, later applied in feminist studies (Hernández, 2021), which frames GBV as embedded in institutional neglect and economic marginalization. In this sense, Medan activists are advancing a critical redefinition of GBV not just as domestic abuse, but as a systemic condition reinforced by state power and religious justifications.

Compared with international feminist protests—such as the *Ni Una Menos* in Latin America (Piscopo, 2020) or *SlutWalk* movements (Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019)—the Medan march similarly insists that resistance must address both policy and cultural structures. However, its insistence on vulnerable groups and religious critiques marks a distinctive local emphasis.

Symbolic Resistance and Performative Politics

Symbolic actions—such as scattering flowers for victims, singing protest songs, and adopting color codes—demonstrate how mourning is transformed into political resistance. This corresponds with Butler's (2015) idea of performative assembly, where public gatherings enact collective vulnerability and agency. The Women's March Medan exemplifies this by turning remembrance into a political claim: "every life lost is an alarm for the nation."

International parallels can be seen in Argentina's *Green Scarf* movement and the United States' use of pink "pussy hats," but the Medan march adapts these tactics through cultural idioms that resonate with local participants. This confirms findings from Harcourt & Escobar (2022), who argue that feminist mobilizations translate global symbols into context-specific performances.

Awareness-Building and Cultural Negotiation

The findings show that activists consciously challenge dominant narratives that justify women's subordination under religion and tradition. Statements such as "under the pretext of religion, women's rights are being taken away" illustrate a direct confrontation with cultural power. This reflects Mahmood's (2005) and Abu-Lughod's (2013) debates on agency in Muslim contexts, but adds nuance by showing how activists themselves mobilize religion not only as a site of oppression but also as a language for legitimacy.

This cultural negotiation sets Women's March Medan apart from Western feminist protests, which often do not contend with the same theological-political nexus. It shows how feminism in Indonesia is not merely derivative but creative—producing a localized feminist discourse rooted in both global solidarity and local struggles.

Claiming Public Space under Backlash

The Women's March Medan reveals the double challenge of making GBV visible while facing societal backlash. Online harassment, accusations of being "anti-religion," and institutional dismissals illustrate what Merry (2016) terms the "contested translation of rights." Yet, despite this, activists claim public streets as their voice, echoing Tarrow's (2011) notion of contentious politics.

This dynamic resonates with other Asian feminist protests, such as those in South Korea's "Escape the Corset" movement (Kim, 2021), where occupying public space was both an act of resistance and a target of backlash.

Contributions and Implications

This research contributes to the global scholarship on feminist resistance in three ways:

1. Expanding GBV definitions by foregrounding structural, state, and religious dimensions.
2. Highlighting symbolic politics as central to Medan's feminist repertoire.
3. Illustrating localized-global feminist interplay, where activists adapt transnational feminist idioms to local religious and cultural contexts.

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Practically, these findings suggest that policymakers must address GBV not only at the domestic level but also in terms of structural inequality and cultural legitimacy. For activists, the Medan case shows the value of symbolic resistance and global-local linkages in sustaining movements despite backlash.

Chat I. Comparison Women's March Medan vs International Feminist Movements



The comparison demonstrates that Women's March Medan embodies a localized feminist resistance that is both connected to and distinct from international feminist movements. While it shares common strategies such as reclaiming public space, symbolic protest, and critiquing structural gender-based violence, its forms of expression are uniquely shaped by Indonesia's religious, cultural, and social context. By hybridizing global discourses (#MeToo, Ni Una Menos, SlutWalk) with Indonesian idioms and practices, the movement negotiates backlash, reframes feminism within local values, and addresses vulnerabilities often overlooked in global campaigns. This indicates that feminist resistance in Medan is not merely an imitation of international trends but a situated struggle that creatively adapts global solidarities to challenge gender-based violence in Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

Women's March Medan represents a localized yet globally connected feminist resistance to GBV. Rather than replicating international models, it creatively adapts them to Indonesia's socio-cultural and religious realities. Its strategies—structural critique, symbolic protest, cultural negotiation, and public space reclamation—demonstrate how global feminist solidarity can be translated into meaningful local activism.

Future research should examine similar movements in other Indonesian cities, explore digital activism as both a tool and a vulnerability, and assess the policy impact of localized feminist mobilizations.

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